

The Heavy Infantry Team:

Expressing Actions at the Decisive Point

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All too frequently at the training centers, units do not effectively wargame courses of action. As a result, rehearsals—which are intended as opportunities for the chain of command to assess a unit's readiness for the mission—become wargaming sessions in which only tentative planning finally takes place.

One common failing is that while subordinate leaders can clearly state their assigned tasks, they are not required to articulate *how* those tasks will be accomplished. The rehearsal fails in its main purpose, which is to reinforce understanding of the concept of the operation. Participants may leave the rehearsal without a clear, common understanding of when and how the decisive action is to take place; or—even worse—they

may *think* they understand it, only to realize later during the after-action review that they did not.

The concept of the operation, including the commander's intent, clearly focuses on the decisive action, but it may not be a complete description of the critical actions that must occur at a given time and place. The precise communication of more information is therefore essential, and this article is intended to offer a framework the commander can use to develop his expression of the decisive action on the objective or in the engagement area. A commander who uses this or any similar technique should be able to derive maximum benefit from wargaming and rehearsals.

A unit must be able to carry out its mission in a correct and timely manner, even in the absence of orders and specific guidance, and the commander has a number of tools that can help him and his unit attain this level of proficiency. The commander's estimate, sound troop-leading procedures, and an understanding of the decision-making process can all help him arrive at the course of action (COA) that will best insure success. Well-written, detailed orders, a clear expression of the commander's intent, and carefully planned and executed rehearsals will facilitate the planning and preparation for combat operations, while also identifying any weaknesses that need to be addressed.

The commander's intent will reflect the extent to which the leader has used his decision-making tools in planning the operation. His intent will include the purpose of the operation, his vision of how it will be executed, and the results it should achieve. A clear expression of the purpose of the operation will enable subordinate commanders to exercise their own initiative and still carry out the mission in the absence of further guidance, should the commander be incapacitated or otherwise unable to communicate with them. The commander's vision—the *how* of the operation—will outline the way the force will be deployed and maneuvered against the enemy. Finally, a discussion of the desired end state will describe what situation should exist relative to the enemy and terrain at the conclusion of the operation.

The commander's intent, which may be expressed orally, or in writing as part of the operations order (OPORD), will serve to focus the planning, preparation, and execution of the OPORD. The maneuver paragraph of the order provides still more detail, focusing on the actions units will take and how they will accomplish the mission. This paragraph will also include the mission essential tasks and missions of subordinate units, many of which closely correspond to the units' mission statements.

The commander begins his description—his vision—of the decisive action to be accomplished by developing COAs. This development includes elements of wargaming and addresses friendly and enemy COAs in terms of action, reaction, and

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counteraction. Although formal COA analysis or wargaming may follow later as part of the decision-making process, it is usually helpful to apply the technique early to give direction and focus to COA development. This will reduce the chance of wasting time on infeasible or unacceptable COAs. Further time can be saved by integrating a consideration of relative combat power and developing significant factors and identifying critical action during the development of the COAs. The advantage of a systematic approach is that better COAs can be

developed and assessed than if the COA elements had been assigned arbitrarily.

Field Manual (FM) 7-10, *The Light Infantry Company*, offers a useful technique for COA development, a seven-step process that applies equally well to units of all sizes and compositions:

Determine the decisive point. The decisive point is that event, geographical location, effect, or combination of these that, once achieved, represents the point at which we are winning and the enemy is losing. At this point, unless we blunder, the enemy cannot prevent the success of our mission. The purpose of determining a decisive point is to focus combat power. It identifies the opportunity for success but does not define success. Many potential decisive points may exist; there is usually no single point. Identifying a decisive point as part of the planning process is simply a start point for COA development.

Determine the desired effects of combat power at the decisive point. This answers the question, "What do I want to accomplish in relation to the enemy and terrain at this point?" and includes considerations of the dynamics of combat power, with firepower, maneuver, protection, and leadership all being weighed in terms of their effectiveness. By focusing friendly strengths against known or projected enemy weaknesses at the decisive point, the commander can begin to identify and develop the actions that will be necessary to accomplish the mission.

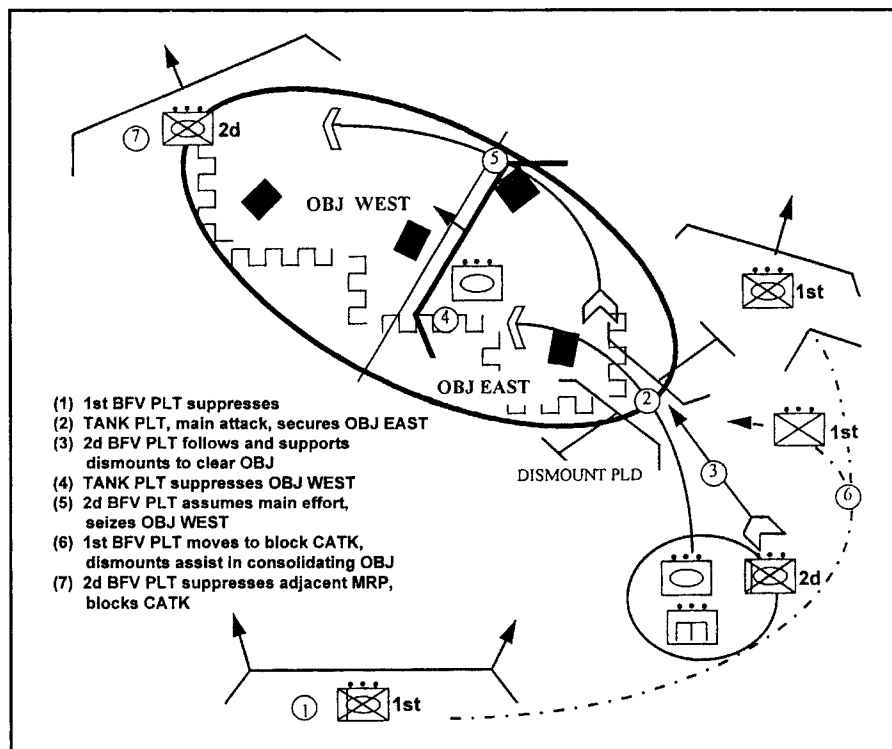
Determine the purposes of the main and supporting efforts. The expression of the purpose reflects both the intended outcome and the method chosen to attain it. Once the subordinate units have accomplished their purpose, the end result will be the accomplishment of the purpose of their higher unit, providing the higher unit commander's intent has been effectively communicated to subordinate leaders. The purpose of the main effort is focused at the decisive point, while the purpose of supporting efforts should complement that of the main effort.

Determine the tasks that best match unit purposes. Typical tasks in the offense include *seize, secure, fix, suppress, and neutralize*. Tasks for units in a defensive role include *block, destroy, fix, interdict, and contain*. Other tasks are possible, and all have distinct military definitions whose understanding is essential to our common language; these can be found in FM 101-5-1, *Military Graphics, Terms, and Symbols*. Units may, of course, be assigned additional tasks that are not their mission essential tasks.

Determine the type and size units to accomplish the tasks and purposes. First, task organize the main effort so that it has the right mix of forces to accomplish its task and purpose. Next allocate forces to the supporting effort or efforts. If additional combat power is necessary, request further resources or determine whether the supporting effort can still be accomplished with the forces available. In any case, do not weaken the main effort.

Determine the command and control requirements for each unit. Who will be in charge of the planning, preparation, and execution of each unit's mission? This is a critical step in the process. Unless responsibilities are carefully analyzed and

Figure 1



assigned, a unit may exceed its leader's logical span of control, or may find itself trying to live with an unworkable command relationship. Such problems may indicate a need to revise an earlier step in the COA development process, because a decisive point identified was not fully analyzed, or because it may be necessary to add or modify mission essential tasks. This process of revision and assessment is to be expected and is essential to the development of well-thought-out COAs.

Develop a visual representation of the COAs. A sketch of the COA should include the significant terrain features with the initial operational graphics, as well as a visualization of the sequence of actions that may or may not appear on the final overlay. A sand table—often useful in supplementing the sketch and highlighting key features of the operation—is as critical to the development of a unit's expression of its decisive action as is the decision support template used during wargaming. Both are invaluable tools that enhance understanding and provide focus during the formulation and rehearsal of the OPORD.

The sequence of developing a COA must be closely followed, because it represents a thought process, and the omission of one of its elements could lead to erroneous decisions whose impact may not become apparent until the wargaming, rehearsal, or even execution of the operation.

While the commander and staff will be active throughout the development of the COA, they must retain a clear vision of what the decisive point or event is to be; they must not confuse the actions leading up to the decisive point with the point or event itself. Likewise, the actions initially represented on the sketch or terrain model used to depict the COA may not remain as originally drawn, but will probably evolve in response to changes to enemy and friendly capabilities and likely COAs.

A common error at this point is to draw graphics first and then develop tasks and purposes to fit the map; this is an easily recognized sign of impatience on the part of an inexperienced commander and his staff.

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of an expression of decisive action by a mechanized team commander whose assigned task is to seize an objective (OBJ EAST) held by a motorized rifle platoon (MRP). His purpose is to establish a foothold so that the main attack can seize a deeper objective (OBJ WEST), the task force (TF) decisive point. The commander has already analyzed the mission, terrain, and enemy in accordance with the estimate process. The next step—COA development—will yield a sketch and his expression of actions on the objective.

The commander knows that he will have to secure and clear the objective; he chooses the destruction of the BMP vehicles and a T-72 attached to the MRP as his decisive point. Understanding that one element cannot both secure and clear the objective, he determines that his main effort can nevertheless achieve the decisive point that will facilitate the attainment of that purpose. Accordingly, he establishes a main effort task with the purpose of destroying vehicles on the objective so that the rest of the company may more easily clear it once the enemy infantry have been separated from their supporting armor.

The team commander further understands that in order to support the main effort, a supporting attack must conduct an assault breach of the enemy position, through which the main effort can continue the attack onto the objective. Another supporting effort must also suppress the enemy on the objective to isolate first the breach point and then each MRP squad position in turn as the main effort assaults the objective.

The commander chooses his attached tank platoon to conduct the main attack, since he knows that—even with an attached engineer platoon—the best and most survivable asset he has to conduct an assault breach is his tank platoon with its firepower and mine plow. But he recognizes that the tank platoon would be overtasked and unprotected against dug-in infantry if called upon to both breach and secure the entire objective. So he revises his COA—and refines his decisive point—by dividing the objective so that the tank platoon is to conduct an assault breach and secure only the first half (OBJ EAST) of the team's objective, while the first Bradley platoon places suppressive fire on both objectives. This definition of a subordinate unit's culminating point is an essential element of the wargaming process.

Once the breach has been achieved and OBJ EAST secured, the second mechanized infantry platoon and its attached engineers follow, and the infantrymen dismount to clear the objective and assist in isolating the breach as necessary. This platoon of infantry then continues the attack to seize the second objective (OBJ WEST), while the tank platoon places suppressive fire on the second objective. At this point, the commander has defined his subordinates' mission essential tasks and purposes, and has provided a visual representation of how they are to be accomplished.

The commander must now address other actions that are significant to fire and maneuver, and that may only become apparent during wargaming or in the course of a rehearsal. The description of actions on the objective must include all actions taken from the time the unit deploys for the attack until the consolidation of the newly seized objective. Again referring to Figure 1, an expression of actions on the objective might read:

The 1st Platoon (Mech) deploys to a support-by-fire position, dismounting to clear a possible enemy combat outpost there. As the Team (-) occupies the assault position, 1st Platoon suppresses the breach point and OBJ EAST with direct and indirect fires while adjusting indirect fires onto OBJ WEST. As 3d Platoon (Tank) conducts assault breach to secure OBJ

Expression of the decisive action should be viewed as a valuable and logical means of rapidly and accurately communicating essential information to the maneuver units of the infantry force.

EAST, 1st Platoon lifts indirect fires and shifts direct fires off the breach point and OBJ EAST and onto OBJ WEST. The tank platoon also employs vehicle exhaust smoke to obscure the breach site and uses green smoke to mark the actual breach or bypass site. In the event an in-stride breach is required, the tank platoon will establish close-in support and the engineer platoon, under 2d Platoon dismount control, will effect the breach. The mine plow tank is OPCON for the breach effort. Once the tank platoon secures OBJ EAST, it suppresses OBJ

WEST while 2d Platoon dismounts clear OBJ EAST. The 2d Platoon (Mech) then assumes the main effort, attacks around the 3d Platoon (Tank), and seizes OBJ WEST. Meanwhile, 1st Platoon (Mech) moves to block possible enemy counterattacks (CATKs) while its dismounts assist in consolidating the objective or clearing beyond the culminating point of the 2d Platoon and its dismounts. The 2d Platoon immediately suppresses the adjacent MRP position, adding its direct fires to those of the TF. The 3d Platoon (Tank) consolidates north on the objective and suppresses as necessary to facilitate the assault of the TF main effort onto the adjacent MRP position.

A statement of actions on the objective may be familiar to many, although it may be applied only infrequently or too late to be useful. A less familiar technique is an expression of actions in the engagement area (EA) in the defense. The expression of actions in the EA is a reflection of how the commander built the EA and is developed concurrently with it. The methods and techniques for structuring an EA include the following:

Target reference points (TRPs). TRPs serve to focus and adjust fires, are either terrain-oriented or enemy-oriented, and can be tied to trigger lines or maximum engagement lines. They can also assist in shifting fires to alternate TRPs or to a TRP nearest an identified target.

Engagement areas. EAs are employed to focus fires over a larger area, and can assist in fire distribution. Assigned EAs can be further divided and assigned to subordinate units.

Fire commands. Usually given verbally, fire commands are used to mass, time, shift, and constrain fires, and may apply from crew through company or battery level.

Fire patterns. The function of fire patterns is to distribute either planned or command directed fires against a particular enemy formation. The patterns include frontal, depth, cross, and near, far, left, and right.

Fire techniques. Used to distribute fires, these techniques can be planned or fire command directed; they include simultaneous (all elements firing), alternating (one element followed by another), or observed (one element fires while another observes or adjusts).

Engagement priorities. Another means of distributing and massing fires, engagement priorities require that specified units or weapons systems be the first to engage targets that have been specified by type, location, or function.

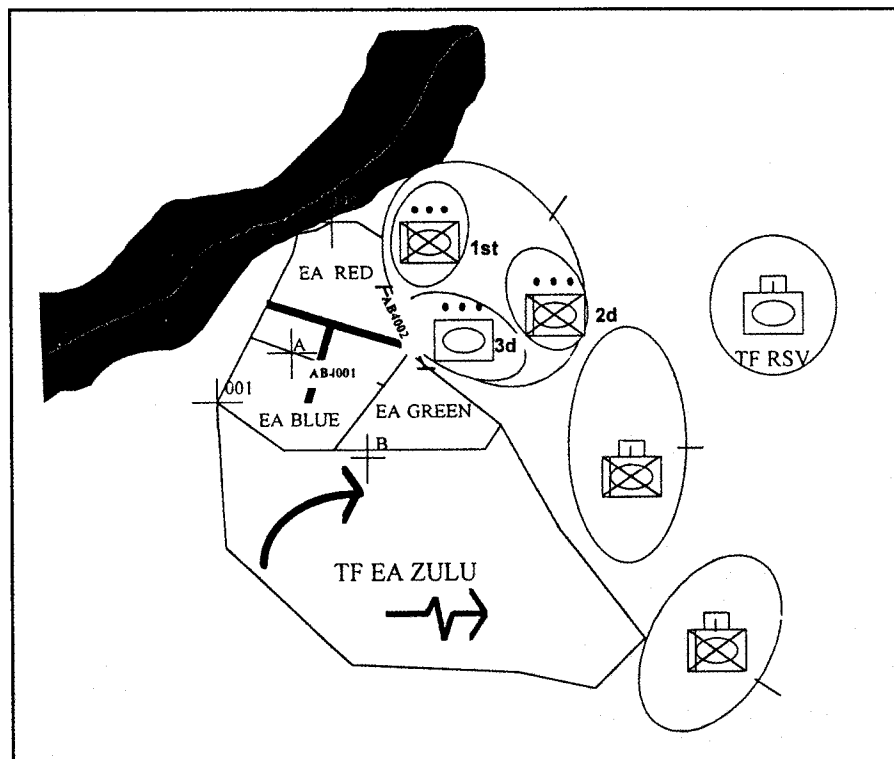
Sectors of fire. Normally defined by boundaries within which a unit operates, sectors can also serve in the massing and distribution of fires, and on-order sectors can assist in shifting fires.

Target array. Another fire control measure, the target array is defined by the disposition of the enemy force and not solely by terrain, as is the case with a sector.

Quadrants. Positioned on enemy formations using terrain as a reference, quadrants may be centered on TRPs and used in conjunction with a target array. In its application, this technique is much like dividing the EA.

These measures are indispensable for the building of an engagement area, and planning for their use requires a thorough understanding of their purpose. It is not enough to place them on a map arbitrarily. As with actions on the objective, the

Figure 2



poorly considered application of these measures may go unnoticed until the wargaming or even the rehearsal phase of the operation. When the fire plan for actions in the EA is drafted, it can include a number of these tools and techniques, but it must include the fundamentals of fire planning. In short, it must provide for the *distribution, focusing, and shifting* of fires as the situation develops; it must facilitate the *massing* of fires; and—most important—the plan must be understandable. Developing a proper expression of actions in the EA is fundamental to ensuring that the fire plan is indeed understood by all who will later depend upon its smooth execution.

To examine the development of actions in an EA, consider the situation of a mechanized team commander in a blocking position (Figure 2), with the mission of blocking the enemy in one portion of a task force EA. His assigned purpose is to prevent the envelopment of the TF main effort on his southern (left) flank.

From his analysis of the mission and situation, the commander determines that to accomplish his mission he will have to either destroy a first echelon motorized rifle battalion (MRB), followed by a possible second echelon MRB in his portion of the EA, or, he must consider his actions if all three MRBs attack to the south of his sector instead. He prudently plans for the first outcome, knowing that adjacent units to his south will deal with the attack in their sector.

In building his EA, the TF commander seeks to focus his own strengths against the enemy's weaknesses, and he tries to do this at the decisive point that will lead to the success of his mission. Having been assigned a TF blocking obstacle, he elects to position it at a place where the enemy will most likely begin deploying into his attack formation, and where he will mass the fires of his team. He also tentatively plans his TRPs

and other control measures to facilitate the development of this decisive point.

Due to its capability as a tank killer and its survivability—both essential to mission success—a tank platoon is designated as the main effort. It is assigned a blocking position with a task of blocking the enemy and the same purpose as the team, that of preventing envelopment of the TF main effort. The commander, concerned about a dismounted avenue of approach leading into his northern flank, decides to use a dismounted effort to prevent this. He assigns his two mechanized platoons battle positions to the flanks of the tank platoon, with the tasks of destroying enemy in sector. They will assist in the destruction of enemy in the EA to prevent the envelopment of the tank platoon from the north and to isolate enemy at the decisive point.

While determining his command and control measures, the commander decides that the blocking of a possible dismounted attack on the northern flank could be better expressed as a task assigned to the mech platoon in the north than as a mission essential task for a separate dismounted element, and adjusts his COA accordingly. Having done this, the team commander next refines his graphics and expression for actions in the EA by continuing with a mental or terrain board analysis that pits possible enemy COAs against friendly reactions and subsequent counteractions.

The following is a sample expression of actions in the EA:

The 2d Platoon (Mech) and 3d Platoon (Tank) engage once a motorized rifle company (MRC) or greater is in EA BLUE. Lead tanks will be destroyed by tank and TOW fires in EA BLUE by all three platoons. Other vehicles will be destroyed by 2d Platoon 25mm fire. The focus of indirect fires will be to neutralize vehicles and destroy dismounts at the blocking obstacle,

allowing most of the team's fires to destroy enemy held up at the decisive point, TRP A. 3d Platoon—along with 25mm fires from 1st Platoon (Mech)—will destroy elements which enter EA RED. Enemy in EA GREEN will be engaged by 25mm fire from 2d Platoon while 3d Platoon engages tanks in the EA. 1st and 3d Platoons continue to engage remaining lead elements in EA RED, while 2d Platoon engages second echelon MRCs in EA BLUE. The destruction of the first echelon MRB will be completed by 1st and 3d Platoons, using the nearest TRP at their command. The second echelon MRB will be engaged initially in EA BLUE by 2d Platoon. Once an MRC from the second echelon MRB crosses into EA RED, 3d Platoon will engage and destroy it. 1st Platoon will assist in its

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destruction once it cannot identify and engage any remaining elements of the first echelon MRB.

Although the focus of this example and our discussion for the defense have referred to EAs, it is relatively simple to apply the principles even when no EAs can be clearly identified. Likewise, the process and method of expression apply to task forces as well as to company teams for both the offense and the defense, and they may differ only in the choice of tools and techniques.

A refined discussion of actions on the objective or in the EA can best be addressed in the OPORD as a part of—or immediately following—the commander's statement of intent and his concept. In a written order, it should be a separate paragraph best found in coordinating instructions. It is critical that the other parts of the order be formulated only after the intent, concept, and decisive actions are developed, to insure synchronization and avoid unnecessary repetition. A synchronization matrix cannot clearly represent as much detail as an expressed decisive actions paragraph. Experience at the training centers further indicates that synchronization matrices complement—but cannot replace—a written maneuver paragraph. Likewise, a fire plan is of limited utility without a complementary oral or

written expression of its meaning.

An expression of actions on the objective or in the engagement area must not be so inclusive that it discourages subordinates' initiative, but it must be complete enough to facilitate the synchronization of the fires and maneuver the commander deems necessary. Additional specific and coordinating instructions can complement the commander's description of the decisive action. Other tools such as priorities of engagement, actions on contact, and displacement criteria may be stated as separate coordinating instructions. The command and signal paragraph can provide detail on the visual and radio communications that will initiate particular phases of the operation.

Even the best expressions of decisive action do not obviate the need for subordinates who are well versed in basic battle skills. This is true even during actions in an EA. Following initial contact with the enemy, company and higher fire commands are rare, but a commander must rely upon detailed, thorough planning to direct the planning and execution at and below platoon level. This is true of both offensive and defensive actions.

Attention to the expression of decisive action will help a commander avoid the tendency to assume the enemy away. It accomplishes this because it forces him to specify how success will be achieved, instead of merely restating the mission essential tasks that should lead to success. The expression of the decisive action is a refinement of the parameters—that is, reasonable limits on initiative—that the commander's intent and concept represent.

The advice offered here has been to complement the already well-established tools available to the commander as he seeks to do the right thing, at the right time, and to the right degree. We have an ever-expanding menu of tactics, techniques, and procedures—so many in fact that commanders may find selection difficult. Expression of the decisive action should be viewed not as just another addition to the list, but as a valuable and logical means of rapidly and accurately communicating essential information to the maneuver units of the infantry force.

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